

## \$590 mil likely for Ariz. road projects

by Sean Holstege - Feb. 13, 2009 12:00 AM

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A showdown is shaping up as early as next week on how Arizona will spend hundreds of millions of dollars in highway money expected from the federal economic-stimulus bill.

The Arizona Department of Transportation expects a windfall of about \$590 million for highway projects that would begin by June. The challenge is that ADOT has identified \$940 million in road-widening, paving and repair jobs that are eligible for stimulus spending.

At stake for Arizona motorists is what types of improvements they will get and to what extent the work will be spread around the state or concentrated in the places that most need help.

Members of the State Transportation Board, which will make the decision, reflect competing interests and must wrestle with the classic conflicts of new vs. old and urban vs. rural.

For struggling contractors or construction workers, the final list of ADOT projects will

be a road map for where to find work. The Transportation Board could decide next week which jobs get done quickly and which get delayed. It will do so on a recommendation from an ADOT director just days on the job. John Halikowski, research director at the Arizona House of Representatives, takes over on Tuesday from outgoing ADOT Director Victor Mendez. Transportation Board panelists said they expect the new director to play a pivotal role.

The stimulus cash won't solve Arizona's lasting transportation woes. The money is roughly equivalent to what Arizona spends in a year on highways. Mendez told transportation commissioners last week that the stimulus money isn't enough to meet the state's needs and that the extra money essentially cancels out the routine funds lost over the past two years.

### Hard choices

ADOT wants to prioritize projects this month, solicit bids in March and award them in April. Last week, the agency unveiled a list of 114 projects being considered because they are "shovel-ready."

Maricopa County is pegged for the largest share of cash, 34 percent. Pima County could see 8 percent, less than Maricopa and three other counties.

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The Maricopa Association of Governments expects to have a say over \$102 million of the money. The regional planning agency has indicated that widening Interstate 17 near Anthem and Interstate 10 near Verrado are leading contenders. The two projects, totaling \$74 million, were ready to go before they were cut from the state budget.

Projects that increase highway capacity, such as new lanes and better interchanges, account for just over half the potential spending on ADOT's list. An additional 40 percent could go to pavement work, and the rest is slated for work such as bridge renovation or routine maintenance.

Normally, highway projects are prioritized months or years in advance by cities and planning agencies such as MAG.

But the stimulus forces quick decisions on big money, often a recipe for behind-the-scenes lobbying from developers, transportation-project sponsors and politicians.

But ADOT spokesman Timothy Tait said pressure has been surprisingly slight. "It has not been what we expected," Tait said. "It's been a process of starting at the bottom and working with the local planners (to determine what was overlooked or which projects don't pass muster)."

Still, there are competing interests among the governor-appointed board members,

Board Chairman Delbert Householder, who represents Pinal, Gila and Graham counties, said he wants rural counties to get a fair share and will look at road safety and disrepair as guideposts for how to spend. He cited a recent fatality on a rural highway and city dwellers' love of hunting, fishing and hiking.

"If there are roads out there that need work, we ought to take care of them," Householder said.

Board member Felipe Zubia, who represents Maricopa County, said basic maintenance jobs such as signs, striping and lighting shouldn't be considered.

Noting the purpose of the money is to create jobs, he said that "adding capacity should be highly weighted criteria."

"Spreading the money very thin on pavement projects is something the board is probably going to take a very close look at," Zubia added.

Si Schorr, who represents Pima County, also wants to focus on projects that most stimulate the economy. "I want to make sure that no matter what, we're left with something meaningful," Schorr said.

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He questioned spending money on projects only on the basis that they could be finished in 90 days, especially if they improve lightly traveled routes.

The \$590 million that ADOT expects to receive would cover the 20 largest projects. The stimulus bill includes "use it or lose it" language: If Arizona doesn't have half its projects under way in three months, the unused share will revert to Washington.

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